FOURTH CHURCH PULPIT
A Place for Everyone

January 28, 2001
John M. Buchanan

It is important to remember the real purpose of communities of faith. It is not to teach the world what to think or even how to act—religious organizations can be as wrong about that as any other organization—but rather to perform the central task of the people of God. God created God's beloved covenant community to persist stubbornly over time for one purpose: to give thanks. We are called to give thanks continually, to remind ourselves, and to tell the world, that God is at work, saving, restoring not just us, but the whole world that God created in love.

Barbara G. Wheeler, President
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FOURTH
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CHURCH

A LIGHT IN THE CITY

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A PLACE FOR EVERYONE
January 28, 2001
JOHN M. BUCHANAN, PASTOR
FOURTH PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Luke 4: 14-21 (NRSV)

"For in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13)

Dear God, come to us in the quiet of this morning, as restless, urgent energy. Come to challenge old assumptions. Come to give us courage to think anew. Come to show us a better way to live. Come to startle us with your truth, your love, your word for us, in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

> **"The old woman stood with eyes uplifted in her Sunday-go-to-meeting clothes: high shoes polished about the tops and toes, a long rusty dress adorned with an old corsage, long withered, and the remnants of an elegant silk scarf. . . .There was a dazed and sleepy look in her aged blue-brown eyes. But for those who searched hastily for 'reasons' in that old tight face, shut now like an ancient door, there was nothing to be read. And so they gazed nakedly upon their own fear transferred; a fear of the black and the old, a terror of the unknown as well as the deeply known. Some of those who saw her there on the church steps spoke words about her that were hardly fit to be heard, others held their pious peace; and some felt vague stirrings of pity, small and persistent and hazy, as if she were an old collie turned out to die."**

That's the way African American author Alice Walker introduces a short story, "The Welcome Table," from a line in an old spiritual:

> **"I'm going to sit at the Welcome table**
> **shout my troubles over**
> **Walk and talk with Jesus."**

The old black woman has staggered down a country road half a mile from her house, on the Lord's day, drawn by the shinning cross that stands high on the church's steeple, to the "welcome table." But it's the wrong church.

Some of them there at the church saw her age, her color, the dotage, the missing buttons down the front of her mildewed black dress. Others saw cooks, chauffers, maids, mistresses. Many saw jungle orgies . . . while others were reminded of riotous anarchists looting and raping in the streets. Those who knew the hesitant creeping of the law, saw the beginning of the end of the sanctuary of Christian worship, saw the desecration of Holy Church.

As she stepped into the vestibule, the minister stopped her: 'Auntie, you know this is not your church.'

The old woman brushed past him and took a seat on a back pew. People stared and shifted uneasily. An usher asked her to leave; she 'waved his frozen blond hair out of her face.'

Finally, it was the ladies who did what to them had to be done, and asked their husband to throw the old colored woman out.

Inside the church it was warmer. They sang, they prayed. The protection and promise of God's impartial love grew more not less desirable as the sermon gathered fury and lashed itself out above their penitent heads.

One of the great anomalies of human history is that religion—which stands for justice, compassion, love, tolerance and almost always a doctrine of creation, an anthropology based on the oneness of the human race—one of the truly great anomalies is how implicated and deeply involved religion is in exclusivism, intolerance, injustice and ethnic violence. There is, it seems, something about religious zeal for truth which is the fertile seed bed of exclusivism which becomes intolerance which becomes violence with striking frequency in the human story. You don't have to go any further than American church history to see it, as Alice Walker has so eloquently expressed it.

Kenneth Ross, Executive Director of Human Rights Watch speaks about the "new tribalism"—and says, "of all the features of the post-Cold War world, the most consistently troubling are turning out to be the tribal hatreds that divide humankind by race, faith and nationality." (Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* p.15)

Croation theologian Miroslav Volf has written an important book, *Exclusion and Embrace,* out of his own personal experiences in the Croatian-Serbian-Bosnian war. Croatia is heavily Roman Catholic, Serbia is predominantly Eastern Orthodox, Bosnia is mostly Muslim. It was that conflict which gave us perhaps the ugliest phrase in the English language—"ethnic cleansing;" the removal of Muslims from what was called "greater Serbia," by whatever means necessary, including massacres. Volf quotes a soldier in the Serbian army which at the time was reigning artillery shells on the beautiful and defenseless city of Sarajevo, into public buildings, hospitals, market places, picking off the elderly, children, in what became known as "snipers alley." "There is no choice," the Serbian soldier said. "There are no innocents." Volf traces the insidious process by which the unthinkable becomes thinkable, and then actually happens, the way historians, economists, political scientists, cultural anthropologists, are easily enlisted to demonize and dehumanize the "other", the "different,"—blacks in South Africa or the American south, Christians in the Sudan, Catholics in Northern Ireland, Muslims in Bosnia, Jews in Germany. "Finally," he observes, "the priests enter in solemn procession and accompanying all this with a soothing background chant that offers to any whose consciences may have been bothered that God is on our side and that the enemy is the

enemy of God and therefore an adversary of everything that is true, good, and beautiful." (p.87-88) The familiar result—apartheid, holocaust, ethnic cleansing.

Dirk Ficca, Presbyterian minister who heads the Parliament of the World's Religions, underscores the fact that learning to live with diversity is the most critical challenge facing our country and our religious institutions.

The statistics on religious diversity in Chicago alone are stunning. There are, in the Chicago Metropolitan area, two million Protestants, 3 million Catholics, 261,000 Jews, 500,000 Muslims; 220,000 Buddhists; 80,000 Hindus; 20,000 Native Americans from 200 different tribes; 5,000 Sikhs, 5,000 Jains, 5,000 Unitarians.

There are, Ficca and others note, four basic ways to deal with diversity: the first is to eliminate diversity, to cleanse the community or nation of the others. That's the choice of Facism; it is the dogma of The Church of the Creator, whose leader, Benjamin Smith, shot five Jewish adults and a child walking to Synagogue in Skokie, African-American basketball coach, Ricky Birdsong and a Korean university student.

It was and is the doctrine and methodology of Nazism in regard to Judaism; zealous Serbians in regard to Muslims and our government, in the 19th century, in regard to Native Americans.

The second way to deal with diversity is the "Melting Pot." Time was, not long ago, that we thought it was a good idea. Melt everyone—blend everyone—into a new identity. And that sounded good until we discovered that it doesn't work: that minority groups that consent to be melted in the pot, end up looking like the predominant culture.

The third way is to compartmentalize. Separate but equal. No mixing. Apartheid. Jim Crow. Segregation. Reservations. Internment camps. It doesn't work either. Besides violating the very basic idea of a free and equal society, separate, we have painfully learned, is never equal.

And so we are driven by pragmatic, painful, tragic experience to the fourth method which is to accept diversity as a basic characteristic of the human condition and then learn to understand it, appreciate it, love it and celebrate it. (See D. Ficca, *Uncommon Ground: Living Faithfully in a Diverse World)*

I'm grateful, by the way, that the melting pot didn't work every time I take a Saturday bike ride up the lake front, beginning at Oak Street Beach, through multi-racial North Avenue Beach, through African American family picnics and the irresistible aroma of barbequed ribs, then an Hispanic baseball game played by adults with families and children and food and loud music, and then a Korean soccer league and finally at the top—the water fountain and bench to rest and chat with a Russian Jewish couple walking their dog and getting a little sun.

We are driven to celebrate diversity by the reality that nothing else works; every other approach ends in injustice, intolerance and tragedy. But of all people, Christians—you and I—who mean to follow and trust and be disciples of Jesus, the Palestinian Jew—of all people you and I should not need to be driven by sociological, political and cultural realities. We ought to begin there, because we were there, as early in our history as possible.

For us—how to deal with diversity—begins in the year 50 AD when a Christian preacher by the name of Paul arrived in one of the most cosmopolitan and diverse cities in the ancient world—the Greek city of Corinth. The little Christian community Paul established had a problem from the start—diversity. Most religions are homogeneous—racially. But not the Christian church in Corinth. In fact, the little church was badly fractured theologically. People were arguing about everything. There were liberals and conservatives and moderates and fundamentalists. There were Jewish believers, and Gentile believers and no one knew what to do with them, and there were people from the east and people of color from the south. And on top if it all, a kind of spiritual enthusiasm broke out in this little church called glossalalia; some were becoming overcome by the Spirit and speaking in tongues and then, as often happens, feeling smug and superior about their experience of faith and condescending toward everybody else.

So Paul writes, patiently, carefully, pragmatically. "There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit . . . varieties of service but one Lord, varieties of activities but one God . . . to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good . . .in the one Spirit we are all baptized into one body—Jews or Greek, slaves or free."

The heart of Paul's argument—and this is both new theologically, and also basic to the Christian faith—is that diversity is God's idea. It is not an accident of geography or biology. It is not a nuisance to be overcome or a problem to be solved.. Diversity is God's gift to the church. Diversity is part and parcel of God's good creation. Diversity is good. It is rooted in the very character of God. And so to deny it, to treat people differently, to do violence to people, to oppress, on the basis of their race—is not simply an affront, it is a denial of the reality of God. It is that basic. There is, in God's kingdom—and therefore there must be in God's church—a place for everybody. Furthermore, diversity is for the common good. Mixing it up is God's delightful intent for creation.

I hope you are not missing Ken Burn's wonderful survey of jazz on WTTW. It is a wonderful celebration of racial diversity. How rich we are in this nation and this culture because of the primary development and creation of this amazing art form within the black community; and how very poor we would be without it.

We have come a long way in forty years. And we have a long way to go—in this nation, and in the church, this Body of Christ. 11:00 on Sunday is still the most segregated hour of the week in America. Affirmative action—which gave this country a hint of what minority leadership might contribute—Colin Powell, Condoleeza Rice, Roderick Paige, new

Secretary of Education—has fallen from favor in some quarters—even in Powell's and Rice's political family.
Our church talks a lot about increasing minority membership and does nothing much that I have seen about it. We've tried to start new churches in burgeoning suburbs, but the last Presbyterian New Church Development in the African American community in Chicago was four decades ago.

We have a long way to go.

Diversity is God's good idea. The one who is different is God's gift to you.

It was Jesus who stunned his friends and followers by reaching out to the racially and ethnically marginalized in his day—the Samaritan woman, for instance.
It was Jesus who welcomed at his table those who were different—the poor, the religiously unorthodox, the sinners, prostitutes, tax collectors.

It is our Lord Jesus Christ who comes close to each one of us when we feel marginalized, shunned, shut out and assures us that we are all one in Christ.

And it is the same Christ who challenges each of us to let go of and to move beyond our discomfort and fear of those who are different and to open our hearts and lives and arms to the beautiful, multi-colored, multi-faceted, multi-raced and multi-cultural diversity of God's good creation.

> "The old woman stood at the top of the steps looking about in bewilderment. She had been singing in her head. They had interrupted her. Promptly she began to sing again. Suddenly she looked down the long gray highway and saw something interesting and delightful coming. She started to grin, toothlessly, with short giggles of joy, jumping about and slapping her hands on her knees. For coming down the highway at a firm but leisurely pace was Jesus . . . .She would have known him, recognized him anywhere . . . .Ecstatically she began to wave her arms for fear he would miss seeing her . . .
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> All he said when he got up close was, 'Follow me' and she bounded down to his side. They walked in deep silence for a long time. Finally, she started telling him about how many years she had cooked for them, cleaned for them, nursed them. . . .
> She told him how they had grabbed her when she was singing in her head and tossed her out of his church. An old heifer like me, she said.
>
> She broke the silence one more time to tell Jesus how glad she was that he had come, how she had often looked at his picture hanging on her wall over her bed, and how she had never expected to see him in person. She did not know where they were going, somewhere wonderful, she suspected. The ground was like clouds under her feet and she felt she could walk forever without becoming the least bit tired. She

even began to sing out loud some of the old spirituals she loved . . . . They walked on, looking straight over the tree tops into the sky . . . .

The people in church never knew what happened to the old woman; they never mentioned her to one another or to anybody else. Most of them heard sometime later that an old colored woman fell dead along the highway. Silly as it seemed, it appeared she had walked herself to death.

Many of the black families along the road said they had seen the old lady . . . sometimes singing . . . sometimes silent and smiling, looking at the sky. She had been alone, they said. Some of them wondered where the old woman had been going so stoutly that it had worn her heart out. They guessed maybe she had relatives across the river some miles away, but none of them really knew." (Alice Walker, *The Welcome Table,* **in** *Listening for God, Contemporary Literature, and the Life of Faith,* **Vol. 1, p.107-114)**

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ."

Amen.

Pastoral Prayer
Fourth Presbyterian Church
January 28, 2001
The Reverend Thomas Rook

Holy God, we pause this morning, within the busyness of life, to give you thanks and praise. O Lord of love, you created your world in love; you breathed life into us in love; you hold us eternally in your love. And yet, you know, O God, for us to believe this, to really receive and rest in your love is not easy. Love without conditions—maybe we've never known such love in our own lives—love that we could count on, no matter what. And maybe we're not sure that we deserve such love, from you or anyone else, O God.

And so how do we come to a real trust in the absolute sureness of your love? Who can confidently point the way? We thank you, gracious God, that you have given us the Way, that you've appointed One to walk beside us, One who leads us the way to life, One who brings to us your love, who assures us that no one is left out of the infinite circumference of your love extending from eternity to eternity. And so we do thank you today that the Spirit of Christ has the power to draw us into your love, to enliven and strengthen us to live in your love each day.

Throughout this congregation, throughout this world, are people visibly in desperate need—in India and El Salvador, in the Congo and in Chicago—lives crushed through natural disaster or accident, through violence or war, or loss of health and strength. There are others whose outward appearance veils an inner suffering. There are ones of us—honestly, all of us—who know that we have come up short morally, who have sometimes or oftentimes failed to act fairly in business or in personal life.

In all these conditions, we can feel desperately alone, and life throws into our face the mocking question: Where is your God? Where is the love of God for you? And then, through that despair, even through death itself, you, gracious Lord, as seed in barren land, you implant within us and then summon forth qualities of faith and courage and hope and care—embodied love, an arm thrown around a neighbor's shoulder, the embrace of a friend, an outreached hand to help, ones stepping forward to become in that moment your heart of love, O God, to become Christ's own hands and feet.

God of restarts and new beginnings, nurture within us the character of Christ himself.

> When we are troubled and fearful, renew our hope and courage.
> When disappointed or shamed by failure, reassure us of your love and forgiveness.
> In the face of life's setbacks, give us endurance.
> Grant us boldness to uphold what is right.
> Soften our hearts to forgive those who have wronged us.
> And shape our lives to be always thankful to you, O God.

Now, trusting in your strong love which securely holds us forever, we pray in the words taught us by our Lord Jesus Christ, saying in one voice, Our Father . . . .